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THE SCHIAVO CASE: THE VIDEOTAPE -- Critic's Notebook; Provocative Snapshots Of a Many-Layered Issue

By VIRGINIA HEFFERNAN
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Five striking images of Terri Schiavo appeared on television yesterday. One showed a beaming young woman with long, wavy hair, apparently in front of a Christmas tree. Another showed a bride in a lacy high-collared dress, flanked by her parents, no groom in sight.

In a third portrait, Ms. Schiavo, in a spiky haircut and heavy makeup, wore an ambiguous expression. A fourth showed a wide-necked woman in bed, regarding a visitor blankly. None of these pictures were dated.

But the final image, a video clip, came with a date: August 2001. In the video, Ms. Schiavo has her head tilted back at an odd angle. She can be seen smiling and looking up at her mother in what might be described as wonderment.

The images were significant because they hinted at what all the pundits failed to address: the human-interest side of Ms. Schiavo's story. Who is she? How sick is she? Should her husband or her parents make life-or-death decisions for her?

Ms. Schiavo's ambiguous predicament invokes so many serious ethical questions in fact that it was baffling to see the news channels concentrate on nothing but contrived Washington debates. The talking heads touched on the details of Ms. Schiavo's case only when they served their preset conclusions.

Right-wing commentators maintained that Ms. Schiavo could be rehabilitated; those on the left insisted either that alertness seen in the video was misleading, or that it had faded since the video was made.

To the viewer, the provocative images provided few answers. It is clear only that a certain blankness befell Ms. Schiavo when her heart stopped in 1990.

But as viewers were regularly reminded, Ms. Schiavo is not brain dead. According to most reports, she is in a "persistent vegetative state," which means, CNN said, that she cannot think, speak or respond to commands, but that she might smile or grimace spontaneously.

CNN's description of Ms. Schiavo's mental state seemed to be at odds with the video of Ms. Schiavo responding with clear pleasure to her mother's ministrations. But that video -- though often presented merely as file videotape of Ms. Schiavo -- was made by Ms. Schiavo's parents, Mary and Bob Schindler, who are intent on proving that their brain-damaged daughter ought not to be denied life-support measures.

William Kristol, the founder of The Weekly Standard, ventured to assert with conviction on Fox News, "She can recover substantially if she gets the proper rehabilitation."

Also on Fox News, Mara Liasson and Juan Williams, correspondents for NPR, responded to Mr. Kristol by trying to deflect attention from Ms. Schiavo's mental state by discussing political matters. Ms. Liasson, like others on the left, added that Ms. Schiavo's predicament might, if nothing else, serve as a reminder to all of us to write a living will.

But what did any of them really know about the medical and personal questions involved here? Ms.

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Schiavo's case is complex, and the complicated dynamics of her family life, as well as her medical history, have been a subject for the courts, but rarely for television.

The networks missed a chance to do the story right, to cover its full arc and give viewers more than a few snapshots on which to base their discussion of this pressing moral issue. All the usual suspects on Fox and CNN could talk about were the political implications, glossing over medical aspects of whether this woman ought to live or die.

Correction: March 23, 2005, Wednesday A Critic's Notebook article on Monday about television coverage of the Terri Schiavo case misidentified a speaker on "Fox News Sunday" who commented on the controversy. He was Fred Barnes, a Fox correspondent and executive editor of The Weekly Standard not William Kristol, the editor of The Weekly Standard, who also appeared on the program.

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The article omitted the beginning of the quotation from Mr. Barnes, which made it clear that he was citing the view of a neurologist, not offering his own prognosis. Speaking of Senator Bill Frist, the majority leader, Mr. Barnes said, "He talked to one of the neurologists who has examined her who says she can recover substantially if she gets the proper rehabilitation."

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